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Intercultural Competence in International Teamwork: Understanding High- and Low-context Communication Styles

Steven R. Levitt*

The University of Texas at San Antonio, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

During the last 30 to 40 years of the 20th century and continuing to the present, the need for multinational teams has grown extensively, and the trend will continue as globalization increases. This qualitative and international empirical study explores cultural factors affecting international team dynamics and effectiveness. The specific purpose of this study is to examine how high- and low-context communication styles impact international teamwork dynamics. Extending previous studies on team dynamics, this study found these styles are manifested in relationship development, face-saving, and power dynamics. Egocentric perceptual schemas continue to create barriers to effective communication. Competence in international teamwork is facilitated by acknowledging and validating cultural identities, reflexive sensemaking of cultural contexts including power relationships, and adaptation of behavior and communication styles. Thus, there is critical demand for increased intercultural competence for industry practitioners.

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Introduction

During the last 30 to 40 years of the 20th century and continuing to the present, the need for multinational teams has grown extensively, and the trend will continue as globalization increases. Despite decades of studying and experience with cultural diversity, international work groups continue to be challenged by ethnocentrism and prejudices. Most domestic and international workplaces include much cultural diversity, and organizational members must function in unity to be successful. There are many challenges. Martin and Nakayama (2010) list four barriers in intercultural communication: ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. According to Marquardt and Horvarth (2001), five typical challenges for international teamwork include managing cultural diversity, differences, and conflicts, handling geographic distances and dispersion of team members, dealing with coordination and control issues, maintaining communication richness, and developing and maintaining team cohesiveness. This study argues that communication richness extends well beyond just simple translations and multiple or redundant channels, into various communication styles such as high- and low-context (direct vs. indirect), and encompass relationship development, face-saving, and power dynamics. Thus, there is critical demand for increased intercultural competence for industry practitioners. The specific purpose of this study is to examine how high- and low-context communication styles are manifest in international teamwork dynamics.

CONTACT

Steven R. Levitt (Ph.D., The Ohio State University, U.S.A.) is Professor, Department of Communication, The University of Texas at San Antonio, U.S.A.

***Corresponding author's email:** steven.levitt@utsa.edu

Organizational Diversity

Organizational diversity can be considered as a mixture of people with different group identities working in the same social system (Fleury, 1999). Discriminating factors between groups include race, geographical origin, ethnicity, gender, age, functional or educational background, physical and cognitive capability, language, lifestyles, beliefs, cultural background, economic category and tenure with the organization (Seyman, 2006). These differences affect people's sense of self-identity, ways of perceiving each other, management styles, attitudes, manners, and communication styles. Previous research on the role and effects of cultural diversity in teams is equivocal, being mediated by specific team processes and moderated by numerous contextual variables (Stahl, Maznevski, Voight, & Jonsen, 2010). In a meta-analysis of 108 empirical studies on processes and performance of multicultural teams, Stahl et al. concluded that more diverse teams suffered from increased conflict, but gained increased creativity. Contrary to hypotheses, team diversity did not result in less effective communication, and diverse teams had higher levels of satisfaction than homogeneous groups. However, they also noted the importance of moderating variables such as team size, team dispersion, team tenure, and task complexity. "Based on the results of a series of meta-analyses, we conclude that cultural diversity in teams can be both an asset and a liability…Future research endeavors should focus on the mechanisms through which cultural diversity affects team dynamics and performance, and on the conditions that help or hinder effective team performance" (Stahl et al., 2010, p. 705).

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence can be defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, to shift frames of reference appropriately and adapt behavior to cultural context" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 249). The development of culture is made possible through communication, and it is through communication that culture is transmitted from one generation to another (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). Shifting frames of reference requires reflective behavioral skills that include analytic processes of sensemaking. This refers to placing stimuli into conceptual frameworks that enable people to "comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict" (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988, p. 51), and "making sense of contradictory behavior – understanding why certain values are more important in certain contexts" (Osland, Bird, Delano, & Jacob, 2000, p. 73).

Attribution Theory

Attributions are inferences individuals make about observed behavior and about the causality underlying that behavior (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1972). This is a process of reflective sensemaking as individuals attempt to determine why others behave the way they do. "Attributions appear to be more common when the observed behavior is unexpected than when it is expected. According to expectancy theories, such as expectancy violations theory (Burgoon & Hale, 1988), the violation of one's expectation causes one to increase cognitive efforts to understand the cause and meaning of the observed behavior" (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999). Intercultural encounters thus involve "dissonance, contradiction, and conflict as well as consensus, concurrence, and transformation" (Guilherme, 2002, p. 219). Understanding this dialectical tension and achieving intercultural effectiveness therefore requires a structural examination and deep understanding of contexts of meaning from team members.

Reflective sensemaking is especially important when encountering a critical incident, or expectancy disconfirmation: "a state where individuals expect a certain behavior or response from those they interact with but experience a different one" (Rosenblatt, Worthley, & MacNab, 2013, p. 358). Martin and Nakayama (2015) discuss a dialectical approach to intercultural communication that considers larger global, social, economic, and political context impacts. They describe a "self-reflective move" where "individuals must swing between the self and larger contexts." Chevrier (2003) presents a "structured examination of cultural contexts of interpretation" where team members or a cultural mediator invites participants to think of problematic situations they have encountered. An inventory of critical incidents is turned into a category scheme: a classification of similar problems. Each member is invited to give interpretation of the situation. For example, why did they act that way? What was the meaning of the move, what factors were involved in feeling it was right? From these answers one may deduce the interpretation systems in use (values, etc.). Then members can discuss possible collective practices deemed acceptable, even if for different reasons.

Similarly, Kassis-Henderson, Cohen, and McCulloch (2018) present a teaching model of negotiation and culture where students are placed in culturally heterogeneous groups "(mixing nationalities, languages, genders, ages, etc.)…they are then asked to analyze a critical incident set in a multicultural educational setting, first individually

then collectively in their group. By sharing, confronting, and discussing their different analyses, they immediately see that a variety of individual analytical perspectives are at play, and not just one single meaning has been taken from it" (p. 313). This exercise emphasizes the importance of diverse contexts and taking multiple perspectives and interpretations into account as opposed to jumping to conclusions or using an egocentric lens for interpretation during sensemaking. Intercultural competence encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities during intercultural communication (Martin & Nakayama, 2015). The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately (communication competence) should include the same skill across culturally diverse environments.

According to Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005), competent intercultural communicators possess "other-centered" qualities: empathy, intercultural experience/training, motivation, want to learn about cultural matters (global attitude), are observant and show interest in differences and are aware of these, and are open to others (ability to listen well in conversation). Improving intercultural competence requires increasing "sensitivity toward verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal cues; increased appreciation of cultural differences and awareness of difficulties dealing with other cultures; a reduction in ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and fear; and an increase in confidence when dealing with other cultures" (Swartz, Barbosa, & Crawford, 2020, p. 59). Swartz et al. found barriers to effective multicultural projects included language barriers, coordinating appointments to match different time zones, and differing expectations and deadlines. Working virtually also exacerbated the difficulties. Technical issues and varying degrees of engagement and reliability between teams working remotely instead of face-to-face were among the worst or most difficult aspects of achieving project success. Finally, they believe theoretical classroom learning is helpful; but cannot replace actual interactions with other cultures.

Linguistic and Cultural Identity

To work successfully with individuals from different cultures, people need to discover what they share with others by expanding the notion of cultural identity (Kassis-Henderson, Cohen, & McCulloch, 2018). "The term cultural identity refers to an individual's sense of self derived from formal or informal membership in groups that transmit and inculcate knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions, and ways of life" (Jameson 2007, p. 207). Cultural identity is not always conscious. People often miss seeing cultural differences or their own prejudices that they are not looking for (Simons & Chabris, 1999). Jameson suggests understanding and appreciating the complexity of cultural identity will help people see commonalities instead of just differences, yet "It is still more difficult to recognize the impact of culture on one's own values, attitudes, and behavior than it is to recognize it in others" (Jameson, 2007, p. 200).

Risager (2012) explains the concept of linguaculture where people employ their linguistic resources on different cultural contexts. Cultural linguistic competence relies on individuals' personal repertoire in order to appropriately adjust their communication style to each situation. Kassis-Henderson et al. (2018) suggest that people have both linguistic and cultural repertoires. "Movement of people across space is therefore never a move across empty spaces. The spaces are always someone's space, and they are filled with norms, expectations, conceptions of what counts as proper and normal (indexical) language use and what does not count as such" (Blommaert, 2010, p. 6). Successful negotiation of different identities, often based on social roles (e.g. manager, subordinate, immigrant, woman, Christian), and thus multilingualism requires using "several linguistic systems in everyday life to draw on several cultural contexts of experience" (Kramsch, 2012, p. 116).

Martin and Nakayama (2015) note the importance of the relational dimension in intercultural communication competence – "that competence cannot be conceptualized as residing in an individual – but rather is a process of negotiation in an ongoing relationship" (p. 17). "Identity negotiation theory" involves "a transactional interaction whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others' desired self-images" (Ting-Toomey 2005, p. 217). Many non-Western cultures are collectivist rather than individualist, stressing the value of the group over the individual. People's self-validation is grounded more in valuing the group one belongs to rather than themselves as individuals, consistent with Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension of collectivism. It is important for managers to understand this difference while reviewing potential employees during hiring and recognizing them during performance evaluations.

Affirming or validating another's cultural identity enhances motivation for intergroup-interpersonal relationships to develop and flourish. Martin and Nakayama (1999) included in their Cultural – Individual dialectic "the tension between wanting to be seen and treated as individuals, and at the same time have their groups identities recognized and affirmed" (p. 15, emphasis added).

Low-context vs. High-context Cultures & Communication Styles

High versus low-context communication refers to how people use the context of the interaction to exchange meaning over and beyond the verbal channels (Hall, 1976). Norton (1978) described communication styles as "the way one verbally and preverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood" (p. 99). Western cultures tend to communicate in a low-context fashion, in which the "mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976, p.79); that is, an attempt is made to explicitly express all details of the communicated information. Low-context styles of communication tend to rely on direct, verbal, "hurried," and individualistic styles. It relies more on the denotative meaning, that is, the direct, literal meaning of the message. This is also known as the content level meaning (Wilmott, 1994).

Other cultures, Asian and Latin for example, tend to use high-context communication, in which "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1976, p. 79). High-context styles are much more subtle, indirect, and rely more on the importance of non-verbal signals. High-context cultures also emphasize harmony, relationships, and "face-saving." Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) noted that people using high-context communication "are expected to communicate in ways that 'camouflage and conceal speakers' true intentions" (p. 100) to maintain harmony in their groups. One way members of such cultures attempt to maintain harmony is by using "face saving" communication as a high-context, indirect style, which must be understood at the subtle, relational level of meaning.

Oetzel, McDermott, Torres, and Sanchez (2012) list three types of face-saving concerns: "self face, or concerns for one's own image; other face, or concern for another's image; and mutual face, or concern for the relationship" (p. 149). You are expected to use the "context cues" to determine what the actual intended meaning is (connotative meaning). This is also known as the relational level meaning: which is the intended meaning, or the interpreted meaning However, every message has both a content and relational level meaning and these always imply something about the relationship status (Wilmott, 1994).

Research Questions

The present study is a part of a larger exploratory study, which asked the following:

Research Question 1: What cultural factors affect international team dynamics and effectiveness?

A. What are some important issues or factors that are most frustrating or most hindering to group processes and successful outcomes?

B. What are some important issues or factors that are most successful or helpful group processes and successful outcomes?

For the specific purpose of this article:

Research Question 2: How do low and high-context communication styles impact international teamwork dynamics?

Methods

While previous studies have identified some cultural factors affecting international and multicultural team performance, such information will be used only to help interpret the final results. According to Ting-Toomey (2010), ethnographic/interpretive researchers (i.e. those working from grounded theory perspective) prefer to operate with a clean slate – meaning no a priori assumptions are made. This is in contrast to a more social scientific use of existing frameworks for testing hypotheses.

In-depth interviews in English were conducted by the author using a semi-structured interview script (see Appendix) between 2011 and 2018. Interviews were conducted face to face, by telephone, and by Skype desktop video conference. Interviews were tape recorded when possible and transcribed. Otherwise, extensive notes approximating near verbatim responses were taken during the interviews.

Respondents included 34 individuals (24 males, 10 females) representing a broad range of industries, including energy, electrical, automotive,aviation, telecommunications/technology, software development, plastics, general contracting, manufacturing, shipping, environmental engineering, architecture, mass media, environmental solutions, venture capital, global food sourcing & import, global branding, and museum exhibition. Collectively, these individuals worked on teams in several dozen countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, North, Central, and South America, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Subjects were recruited using a "snowball" sampling (referral) method. In order to qualify, individuals met three criteria: 1) they held management or supervisory positions; 2) they worked on teams with members from different countries; and 3) they spent part of their work time abroad. This sampling ensured that the respondent has significant intercultural experience, particularly spending time in a

country different from their native one. One exception was made for a staff member who knew intimate details of projects due to the processing of all contracts and continual close contact with engineers in the firm who work abroad, as well as extensive phone and email contact with foreign partner organizations.

Analysis of Data

The interviews resulted in more than 140 pages of transcripts and notes. A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used which calls for a continual cycle between data collection and analysis. The data analysis was done in an iterative fashion: initially manually open-coding the transcripts and notes into major themes and categories, subsequently returning to the literature and then data repeatedly to refine the categories and help with interpretation. Three criteria are typically used to identify initial themes in the narratives: 1) recurrence between participants, 2) repetition by the same participant, and 3) forcefulness or emphasis (Keyton, 2011). For this study, recurrences between participants and by the same participant were the key criteria used to identify themes.

Disclaimer

Examples from specific countries and cultures presented reflect the verbatim narratives and opinions of the respondents. No claim is made that these examples are representative of all members of those countries/cultures, nor that such representations are culturally accurate – only that they illustrate cultural factors that the respondents perceived as present in, and affect, these international teamwork dynamics.

Narrative Results

Research questions 1 and 2 are addressed in a previous article based on the initial exploratory study (Levitt, 2015). Research question 2 for the present study asked how do low and high-context communication styles impact international teamwork dynamics? Many examples of high and low-context communication styles were present in the interview narratives. High-context styles were the most prominent examples, and they impacted and were impacted by egocentric perceptual schemes, importance of relationships, and power dynamics. High-context communication was also manifest as face-saving language, use of food as high-context communication, and to a lesser extent individualism versus collectivism cultures.

Egocentric Perceptual Schemas

Ethnocentrism is characterized by a tendency to judge people from other cultures by standards from our own cultural background, including a bias that causes people to negatively evaluate behaviors divergent from their own culture's norms (Brislin, 1990; Gudykunst, 1991). Highly ethnocentric individuals see their own cultural groups as "virtuous and superior," and its ingroup values (and language styles) as universal, therefore applying to everyone (Thomas, 1996, p. 218). A common occurrence is misunderstanding the implicit meaning behind high-context, indirect communication styles.

An example of a male U.S. team member's perception using his own cultural schema serves to illustrate how ethnocentrism can reduce validation of others' self-identities:

> *In Libya it was very important for the Libyans to show us what was going on. Take the road from Tripoli to Misrata, and there's one road in and out. And it's kind of a beach road…it's beautiful water with palm trees like the Italian Mediterranean. The same blue. You've got sand, you've got palm trees. And we said 'wow, you've got to put up some hotels, and a casino, you know, somewhat similar to what Bahrain has done. You guys could really revitalize this area with tourism and putting up certain kinds of businesses, you know, all Libyan owned businesses. It would be very good for everybody, right?' And his problem was 'no, we don't want to do that. We like people to come to Libya and see how we live as Libyans. You guys should experience our culture. The point is not for you guys to come and experience what you experience at home. The point is for you guys to come and experience us. No alcohol, no things like this.'*

Another example of ethnocentrism was characterized by a U.S. male as a "World War II business manager approach." In a company in Spain, the boss was a retired U.S. Air Force General. He wanted 7:30 or 8:00 a.m. meetings in Madrid, but only half of the people would show up. He became very upset and tried to force workers to show up early. His attitude was: "The American way is the best. Like it or quit!" But the employees continued to come in at 10:00 a.m., took lunch at 2:00 p.m., worked late and had dinner at 9:00 p.m. Note also how even the term "American" is used exclusively for the USA, despite the fact that Canadians, Mexicans and

those from Latin and South America are also "Americans."

> From a male Mexican respondent:
> *To make the team work members must understand they are equals. Americans think their culture and education in America are better than in Mexico. Our opinions are not valued. "I hear you, but do not listen. We know better how to solve problems." The Mexicans feel "Oh, here comes this guy, he's going to tell us what to do." But, Americans are very willing to teach you if they are experts. Look for a way for them to see the problem themselves. If you have an objective and you know the answer, you direct them to find it, but don't tell them, so they realize it for themselves.*
> This is an example of face-saving to be discussed later.

Oetzel, McDermott, Torres, & Sanchez, (2012) suggest that "diversity, and thus the impact of diversity, is locally situated. In other words, our interpretation of, and reaction to, diversity may be more determined by local composition and everyday expectations rather than the macro demographics of a nation" (p. 162). They feel that many managers, especially in the U.S., place more emphasis on outcomes than group processes, yet communication processes are important in determining the effectiveness of a group. For example, one female respondent from Lithuania said one of her team's objectives was "To adapt group's communication (of specific projects or corporate news) to local specifics. The primary aim is that our organizations at different markets would speak in one voice." However, she noted this barrier:

> *"Communication and decision making at the group level usually involves only head of the teams. Accordingly, local project managers act at the local level and most often don't participate in the decision making at the group level…misunderstandings are influenced by management style in those cases then decisions are not explained for the rest of the team in [a] timely manner. They are solved by open communication, as well as by analysis of the feedback and following decisions [an example of a reflective skill]. If communication at different levels of the group projects was more explicit [low-context, direct style to be discussed next], general efficiency and satisfaction could improve."*

However, Nam, Cho, and Lee (2014) suggest that most assessment measures of employees' cross-cultural competence are developed from Western cultural values and what are considered successful competence behaviors in Western culture are not applicable to non-Western contexts. For example, using a direct style of communication that makes meaning explicit and gives direct feedback is more typical of 'low-context' cultures like that in the USA. Such a strategy is not consistent with "high-context" cultures, which favor more implicit meanings using indirect styles of communication, including face-saving behaviors such as a reluctance to say no (Chevrier, 2003).

Low-Context vs. High-Context Cultures & Communication Styles

Low-context. Recall that a low-context style of communication is direct, verbal, "hurried," and individualistic. It relies more on the denotative meaning, that is, the direct, literal meaning of the message. This is also known as the **content level meaning**. One male respondent from the U.S. said "Australians are direct, whine in your face." Another female respondent from the U.S. said team members from the Netherlands were very direct, "cut to the chase, no softness" whereas Panamanians used a "soft touch" while giving negative feedback, "accounting for people's feelings." Their leadership styles were "more democratic, family oriented, and collaborative," consistent with high-context communication styles.

High-context. As previously mentioned, high-context styles are much more subtle, indirect, and rely more on the importance of non-verbal signals. High-context cultures also emphasize harmony, relationships, and "face-saving." Understanding the subtle, highly contextualized meaning of high-context communication reflective sensemaking, especially important when encountering a critical incident, or *expectancy disconfirmation.*

As an example of the need for reflective analysis from the interview narratives, a male manager from the U.S. was discussing a performance evaluation with an employee in New Zealand whose performance needed improvement. Midway through, as he was indicating further action would be taken if the employee's performance did not improve, the employee suddenly said "Oh, it's 4:30, time to go." He proceeded to get up and quickly leave the building. Being new to the culture, the manager was affronted by what he considered rude and insubordinate behavior. His first inclination was to go to Human Resources and take the next [punitive] step to get the employee's attention. Instead, he said to himself "Something weird just happened and I need to not react but do some fact checking first." The

manager subsequently learned that people from New Zealand have a very strong life/work balance, much stronger than in the U.S. Therefore, it is not expected that employees will remain at work once their "shift" is over. The Human Relations Director was not surprised at the employee's hasty departure, explaining that he takes the bus to work and leaves at 4:30 to catch his ride. This understanding of work-life balance value helped the U.S. manager more appropriately *reframe* and interpret the high-context meaning of the hasty departure within the cultural context, even while it created tension for him.

In another example, a male respondent from U.S. was discussing partner companies in the Netherlands, and the UK:

> *We have mobile phones that do not have owners assigned to them. We have several unknowns. We just label them unknown and we try to find out whose number it is. We ask the company "why don't you send out a text message and say "please respond and update us about the owner of this device? If you do not, in two weeks we will terminate service." It seems logical in the U.S. if [your company] is going to pay for your phone, they expect you to update the information. If you don't they can deactivate the service. Well, the companies we are dealing with in both the UK and Netherlands said "we can't tell our employees that. We cannot be so stern in our communications to our end users."*

Importance of Relationship

"So, did we wake up together?" According to one female respondent who grew up in Venezuela, "This implies 'hey, slow down, we have not gotten to know each other yet.' If you are obviously American, they [Latin Americans] assume you'll be wanting to jump right into business." Another male from Columbia said "In Latin cultures, relationships are more important. Business relationships are the *result* of personal relationships. We spend 2-3 hours at lunch 'not talking' about it." And "decision making and conflict resolution is very *personal*, not like in the U.S. where they separate business from relationship."

A male U.S. respondent said "The harder part is the 'soft' part of management." Another female respondent from the U.S. said "in Asia and Latin America it takes several months of meeting family, developing trust, *then* get to the deal." A male respondent from the U.S. said "In Ireland, it's about conversation, relationship. The tend to buy not what you do but *why* you do it and what it holds for the future. They want to be comfortable in a long-term relationship. Another male respondent from the U.S. working in Italy said "Passeggiata was very important. You go out for walks after dinner to focus on relationship."[1]

In another example, a U.S. male respondent said:

> *I was talking to their daughter who was trying to open a new restaurant. I probably picked that up when I was working with her. She used to spend a lot of time explaining to me how, at least in her mind, how inferior U.S. culture was compared to Taiwan. Notions of politeness. I would always say hello to her parents and she told me after a couple of months her parents thought I was very rude. And I said 'why?' 'Well, you never asked them how they are. You just seemed not to care about them at all.' And in China you say 'Ni hao' which is Chinese for hello…[but] the sub-context is more 'how are you?' rather than hello.*

Gudykunst et al. (1996) found that "individual level factors (i.e. self-construal) [cultural identity] are better predictors of low- and high-context communication styles across cultures than cultural individualism-collectivism" (p. 510). However, one male interview respondent from the U.S. said "You have to be careful. In Malaysia, Thailand, [and] Hong Kong they don't like public or individual recognition." This can, for instance, translate directly into how résumés are written and interpreted. He indicated people from collectivist cultures are more likely to emphasis the "we" and the team in accomplishments, which does not carry the same impact with a manager from an individualistic culture where people are expected to promote *themselves.*

[1] "La Passeggiata is one of those daily rituals that Italians and everyone visiting Italy should really enjoy – just taking some time late in the day to relax and walk through the pedestrian streets, greeting old friends, window shopping or just wander aimlessly connecting with people and celebrating the end of a wonderful day in Italy." (https://travelphotodiscovery.com/la-passeggiata-an-evening-stroll-in-italy).

Saving Face (High-context Style)

A male U.S. respondent said "They [Mexicans] avoid confrontation at all costs. And they will never tell you no. That's not in their vocabulary. They will do anything and everything they can to try to agree with you. Whether they do or not they'll tell you that "Yeah, yeah, great. I agree. That sounds good. We'll work on it. And they have absolutely no intention of doing it. Similarly, another respondent said for both companies she worked with in Japan there was "a desire to please the customer, but that often means they can't say no. There's a lot of nodding, then inhaling through the teeth. This means no! You need to know this."

Several respondents' experiences exemplify the three types of face-saving concerns (self, other, and mutual). A male manager from the U.S. working in the China was initially asking himself "why can't they just be honest?" Let's say you're in a manufacturing plant and you say "this needs to be fixed. You've got to fix this." Say a valve's installed incorrectly. And you say "please go fix it." And then they say "yes, yes, yes, of course." They're going to say "yes, of course" regardless of whether they understand what we told them to do. When they tell you that they're not wanting to tell you no. Or they're not wanting to tell you 'I don't understand.' *Because that would be somewhat rude in their opinion to tell you because at that point you didn't communicate clearly...* They don't want to say no or that they didn't understand in order to save face *for you* … people from the U.S. value honesty, but we may offend the Chinese if we are *too* honest. And so you can go away and get very angry because you come back a week later and it's still not done (***other face***).

A U.S. female respondent felt "[In China] they will promise more than they can deliver. To say you can't do something is a sign of weakness" (***self face***). Finally, one male U.S. respondent talked of the importance of saving face in Korea.

> *If they make a proposal and we want to change it, you have to help them put a spin on it before they go back to a superior for approval to ensure it does not look like someone made a mistake. For example, we needed to change a volume order, so we adjusted the price downward a bit to give him 'good news' to take back to his supervisor, an incentive to go back to the supervisor. You need to appreciate what he has to go through with his boss. This builds mutual respect and relationship for the future (**mutual face**).*

Similarly, a female respondent from Venezuela related that:

> *"In Mexico it's still a Mañana culture." She gave an example of a sugar buyer who owes her a letter to change billing. It had been two months since she asked him for it. "But he still went to Miami for holy week. So that's 'hands off.' I'm accommodating him by saying 'we'll fix it when you get back.' So even though he's owed me, he'll remember my accommodation" (**mutual face**).*

Use of Food as High-context Relational Level Communication

It is well known that actions often speak louder than words. The use of food as symbolic communication was prominent in numerous narratives. For example, one U.S. female respondent did not realize a deal she was trying to finalize in China had "gone sour" until she was served raw sea urchin, raw crab, and dog meat at a banquet. "In Asia they tell you verbally what you want to hear: 'yes, yes, yes', etc. But *where they take you and what they feed you says more*…If Chinese people serve you dog, you know they're not happy! They take you out of your comfort zone when things are not going well." The behavior was apparently a result of perceived arrogance of the U.S. team. She said the Chinese were "overwhelmingly trying to put them in their place" [power relationship].

Similarly, a male respondent from the U.S. said "in Beijing they had 3-hour lunches and 3-hour dinners every day. They served "all sorts of weird food. The hosts would not eat for the first hour, maybe to show restraint, hospitality, or maybe it was a test…they put us through an exhaustive test to see us eat dog, cat, bugs and such, to test our will to do work with them."

On the other hand, several respondents suggested that they knew the relationship was going well when the natives from the country took them to their favorite local places instead of the typical tourist locations. A male respondent from the U.S. related that in Australia he was "invited to their favorite places to eat. Bringing you to the house would the ultimate honor. Food is a way to form connections." A female respondent from the U.S. also said "If you find they've taken you to a place where they often take customers, you're not special." A female respondent from Venezuela, working in the U.S., related a case where after a long day of production plant tours in the Himalayan region of India, the very wealthy owner of the Indian company invited a U.S. team to his home instead of taking them out to dinner at an expensive restaurant to "wine and dine" them as is typical. His wife served them egg salad sandwiches from her fresh eggs and homemade bread. This "sense of pride communicated he was happy, and business was

going great." Otherwise he would have taken them to a restaurant. "You must pay attention to what this means."

Power as High-context Relational Level Communication

Numerous interview narratives refer to how hierarchy and formal titles confer status, impact self-validation, and management behaviors. As an example, one respondent from India related that "For an Indian manager to ask for a subordinate's opinion is seen as weakness. Thus there is not much interaction between levels." Another example was from a U.S. male respondent working in Brazil. The company hired a U.S.-educated Brazilian as a Deputy Program Manager to establish the relationships, even though he was not the most qualified person. Specifically, it was a tactic to make sure the Brazilian "higher ups" (Admirals, Defense Ministers) knew *he* (the Brazilian) was in charge. Another male U.S. respondent related that:

> *In China, regardless of who you are, if you've got 'Chief Operating Officer' on your card you get X amount more clout. More respect…. for one guy, we printed out fake business cards. So he goes over there, and [he does not use] his actual title. He has different business cards he hands out when he's abroad. Titles to us are relatively meaningless, at least in this organization. So if he has 'Vice President' instead of 'Technician' then 'Oh, ok. We'll take care of your needs since you are a Vice President. You're so far above me on your hierarchy I should do what you want me to do.' And so because of that he gets more honest answers, I think.*

Similarly, a female U.S. respondent said "In Japan, they have hierarchies. Where you are in the company is very important. If I am not high enough or perceived high enough, I get no answers. I have to have my supervisor talk to their supervisor to get things done. This is a frustrating barrier, insulting. I feel like I am being brushed off." This respondent was female, but she felt it was not a gender issue. It was position that mattered. Another male respondent from India suggested:

> *India requires more outward show of respect for elders. They talk first. You speak more when spoken to. The U.S. is a very horizontal workspace. People are treated more equally, they are more proactive, ask more questions of the boss, initiate more conversations, and are expected and encouraged to participate in meetings even when you are young. In Asia you listen more.*

Another U.S. male respondent talked about developers from the Middle East working on a manufacturing project in the U.S.:

> *They were pretty direct: "Do it my way." Their attitude was, if it's rational, do it. If it's irrational, do it anyway. "You're here for me, do it." They grew up with servants with tiers of class. So they still treat everyone like they are not in their class, "Do what I want." They are used to treating everyone at home like this, so this carries over when they come to the U.S.: "Do what I say."*

Similarly, yet another male respondent from the U.S. noticed specific contrasts between the U.S. and Asia (Korea, Malaysia).

> *Engineers and employees would wait for instructions – whatever the hierarchy suggested and expected. I was much older than many, so they would not openly question me or openly share their ideas. That would sound disrespectful. In the U.S. people are much more open so I would have to 'dig' for ideas. They were looking at me to be a leader and mentor only because of my age, even though some had more experience and knowledge.*

Conclusion and Recommendations

One cannot assume the attitudes necessary to develop intercultural competence (e.g. respect and openness) are present (Sample, 2012). They are dependent on active engagement with diversity over time and result from a "shift in the internal frame of reference toward a more relative view of the self" (Lee, Poch, Shaw, & Williams, 2012, p. 27). Fisher, Ury, and Patton (2011) suggest people tend to see what they want to, pick out and focus on facts that confirm their prior perceptions (egocentric selective attention, perception, recall). Therefore, "One should prepare for intercultural relationships by first evaluating one's own culture and learning and analyzing it…in doing this, privilege would be revealed and previous accounts of ethnocentrism would be uncovered" (Thomas, 1996, p. 225). Intercultural competence requires sensitivity to one's own ethnocentric schemas, by examining their own cultural values and their impacts on self-identity, in order to better appreciate and affirm *others'* cultural identities.

Low and High-context Communication Styles

The narratives indicate many frustrations and misunderstandings can occur when members of low-context cultures with more direct styles of communication, focusing at the *content level* of meaning, interact with members of more high-context cultures using indirect, subtle communication styles. Members of international teams must learn more about recognizing the difference between *content and relational levels of meaning*. "When I say or write something, there are actually a whole lot of different things I am communicating. The propositional content (i.e., the verbal information I'm trying to convey) is only one part of it. Another part is stuff about me, the communicator" (Wallace, 2005). Use of face saving, high context communication is a good example. When members of high-context cultures find it difficult to say no and instead say "yes, yes, of course" are overtly communicating at the content level of meaning, but the underlying relational level is very different: "I desire team harmony so I will say yes even when I do not mean it (mutual face)." Or, they may say "yes, yes, I understand" even if they do not, but the relational level meaning is "I desire harmony and do not wish to insult you by implying you did not communicate clearly (other face)." One frustrated U.S. manager described earlier where the manufacturing plant in China was asking himself "why can't they just be honest?" Instead of concluding these individuals will not tell the truth, a self-reflective, focus on the underlying meaning in context revealed the high-context relational level meaning.

Recall every message has both a content and relational level meaning. Fisher, Ury, and Patton (2011) discuss the difference between positions and interests, which are consistent with these two levels of meaning. *Positions* (content level meaning) are typically overtly stated demands or what someone says they want. On the other hand, *interests* (relational level meaning) are the underlying wants, concerns, and hopes. They may indicate unmet basic human needs, such as harmony, which are largely shaped by our cultural values and priorities. A complaint or action at the content level of meaning is usually a "wish" for something different (the relational level meaning). Serving food considered abhorrent to most people from the U.S. is a clear relational-level statement about the underlying interests of the host, as well as indicating the status of the relationship. Alternatively, taking a client to a local favorite restaurant or inviting them to their home indicates a very different relationship status.

Identify the "wish" (interest) underlying the statement or action. As a hypothetical example, a position may be "Our meetings are so disorganized. The manager never prepares in advance, and team members often show up late." Interest, at the relational level of meaning, would be "So you wish she would prepare an agenda for the meetings, and the meetings would begin on time." It is easier to find mutual understanding at the relational level when an issue is stated in a positive manner.

All business ventures have two kinds of interests: in the substance (goals, tasks, etc.) and in the relationship. Sometimes the ongoing relationship is more important than the outcome of any one negotiation (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011). As an example, these authors describe the difference between content and relational levels of meaning: "I see your position as a statement about how you would like the negotiation to end; from my point of view it demonstrates how little you care about our relationship" (p. 21).

Relationship

The narratives suggest much high-context communication centers around relationship. A female respondent from the U.S suggested "Take time to develop a *personal* relationship. Business relationships are the *result* of personal relationships – spending a couple of hours over lunch 'not talking about it' and also getting to know people's family members' names and inquiring about their well-being." A male Mexican respondent said "We admire some of the ways that you guys in the States do business. But all this stuff that's related to relationship? You guys just blow by it and therefore you are lewd, you're aggressive, you're assertive, you're insistent on your own way." To help build relationships with team members where interactions are happening mostly on the phone or computer, the female respondent from the U.S. quoted above also said "start conversations with personal chatting about their family, coffee or other pleasantries, exchange pictures."

"Cross-cultural teams could not be effective without special personal qualities of their members, namely "*openness," "patience," "self-control"* (Chevrier, 2003, p. 146). Despite irritations with others' behaviors which do not conform to their expectations (e.g. being unprepared for meetings, arriving late) members control themselves to avoid conflicts. The keys to developing relationships are ***p**atience, **p**erseverance, and focus on **p**eople.* The following quote by female respondent from Venezuela, working in the U.S., is very expressive about focusing on people: "what's called multitasking today is what was not paying attention in the 1970's. A little less of us in each thing we do. We need to focus on one thing at a time. Americans are poor listeners because we're so distracted." Even when talking directly, people don't pay enough attention to relational level meanings. A focus on relationship can also

lead to a more purposeful and thoughtful examination of cultural contexts and expectancy disconfirmation. These are important for effective interpretation and mutual understanding of behavioral meaning which occur as *high-context* symbolic interactions.

Work on assimilation: A male respondent from the U.S. who lived in England said "Blend in, understand their culture. We're not always right. Do a better job of assimilating. Where is the middle ground? When possible make room for a local, someone who really knows local customs and language. Branches need to be full of local hires, even if top management is not. This is important to establishing relationships with local suppliers. The locals work and live here, pay taxes here, go to school here." Natives have homophily and can help build relationships with necessary business partners and the community. In addition, natives understand high-context communication nuances and implied meanings more accurately thank non-natives.

Finally, people in international teamwork contexts must be able to "hold two polarized value systems and be at ease with the *dynamic tensions* that exist" (Ting-Toomey 2005, 230, emphasis added). For example, a male manager from the USA worked for a printer company that has a local design team and manufacturing plant in the Philippines. He travelled to the Philippines to work with the local design team to solve paper jamming problems so the production line could be made ready for the new models as soon as possible. In the midst of some intense design work, one Philippine worker suddenly picked up a guitar and began to play. The other locals joined in the singing and this lasted about 30 minutes. The U.S. manager came in and began yelling at the Philippine workers: "What are you doing? We don't have time to waste! Get back to work! I'm not paying you to sing!" This response may have been appropriate in a U.S. context, but it was not appropriate in the Philippines. The Philippine people are reported by several interview respondents to use music and singing as a way to increase team cohesiveness and reduce stress, while U.S. workers are typically more task- and deadline-driven, and focus much less on relationship development in the business context. International teamwork will always demand accepting polarized value systems and thus dynamic *dialectic tensions* that exist between members with diverse cultural values and practices.

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Appendix

Interview Script

1. Please describe the characteristics of your team in terms of: Number of members, Cultural diversity, Length of time working together, Dispersion (where are team members located?), Goals and objectives (what are the group's expected or desired outcomes?), Typical communication methods (e.g. face to face, electronic, etc.), Tasks (please describe some typical tasks the members engage in to achieve outcomes), and Any other characteristics or background information you think it might be important for me to know in order to understand your team's dynamics

2. Please describe some important cultural issues or factors you find most successful or helpful in your team's processes.

3. Please describe some important cultural issues or factors that you find most frustrating or most hindering to your group processes and successful outcomes.

- What kind of conflicts are experienced, and how are they managed?
- How are tensions between contradictory or competing cultural values resolved?

4. In your opinion, what changes to your group or organization could be made to improve processes and outcomes?

5. Is there anything else I should know to understand the *cultural* dynamics of your team that help or hinder its performance?